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SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SIT-IN BY ETHIOPIAN REFUGEES AT UNHCR SANA'A

1. (SBU) Summary. A group of former refugees composed of Mengistu-era Ethiopian naval officers have maintained a 24/7 sit-in at Sanaa's UNHCR office for eight days demanding consideration for resettlement in the US or another third country. The sit-in began on Tuesday, February 10, after a UNHCR translator informed someone outside UNHCR's offices of the expected late-April DHS visit to Yemen to take applications for resettlement. UNHCR is located adjacent to the residence of the DCM, creating security concerns. End Summary.

2. (UN) With the fall of the Mengistu government in 1991 a group of 700 Ethiopian naval officers fled to Yemen with 14 Ethiopian naval vessels. While approximately 150 of the officers eventually returned to Ethiopia the rest remain in Yemen. To date the group has not been integrated into Yemeni society nor accorded the status of legitimate refugees. On February 10 they began a 24/7 sit-in in front of the UNHCR to draw attention to their plight. According to UNHCR, the group is neither completely homogeneous nor unified. Some members wish to remain in Yemen and are seeking their legal rights under the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, which Yemen signed but never implemented domestically. This faction is reportedly seeking work permits and in some cases nationality in Yemen. The majority of the group seeks resettlement in a third country, namely the US or Canada, and is opposed to being registered in Yemen because they believe that will end their chances for third country resettlement.

3. (SBU) On February 15, 2004, representatives of the refugees met with UNHCR for over 3 hours, during which the refugees expressed their demands and UNHCR explained the options available to them. Subsequent to the February 15th meeting, UNHCR met with the ROYG Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to push for host government compliance with its Convention obligations as well as to protest the lack of security surrounding the sit-in. According to Saad Al-Attar, the UNHCR representative managing the situation, someone in the host government admitted in front of UNHCR staff members that the ROYG gave the demonstrators a tacit green light to commence and continue, despite the fact that no permit to protest was issued. Al-Attar stated that in the past when even a few demonstrators have appeared at UNHCR, government authorities have cleared them away without delay. In his view, the fact that this sit-in has lasted over a week and initially swelled to over one hundred people is evidence of ROYG involvement.

4. Comment. Most of the initial group have reportedly returned to work, but a residual group of several dozen remains. The sit-in remained at all times peaceful. Post has informed the DHS regional refugee coordinator in Cairo, and will continue to monitor the situation. At this time there does not appear to be any reason to postpone or cancel the planned DHS visit to Yemen in late April.

MISENHEIMER